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CIA running 'lots' of covert actions, but not subversion

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Jimmy Carter came to office sounding skeptical about the secret operations of the American intelligence agencies.

And, if one is to believe senators and congressmen responsible for overseeing such operations, Mr. Carter kept cloak and dagger work to a minimum during his first 2 1/2 years in office.

But now the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is running "lots" of so-called covert operations, according to a congressman who chairs the subcommittee in the House of Representatives intended to oversee such activities.

US Rep. Les Aspin (D) of Wisconsin, whose subcommittee comes under the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, says, however, that most of the Carter administration's new covert operations are in the propaganda field.

Mr. Aspin declined to comment on press reports that the US secretly began in mid-January supplying Afghan rebels with light infantry weapons. According to the New York Times, the decision to send arms to the insurgents was made by the special coordinating committee of the National Security Council, chaired by Zbigniew Brzezinski, the President's National Security Adviser. It was described as the first CIA operation of its kind since the Angolan civil war of 1975-76, when it secretly supported two factions fighting Soviet-backed forces there.

(A book written by John Stockwell, one-time chief of the CIA's Angola task force, later revealed that the agency's operation in that country combined a no-win policy in Washington with botched action in the field. Money was wasted on such things as ice plants, fishing boats, and a yacht. Rockets misfired. Mercenaries refused to fight.)

In an interview prepared for broadcast over National Public Radio (NPR), Representative Aspin, a liberal with a reputation

for fighting Pentagon waste, said the CIA has not gone back to conducting paramilitary operations such as it undertook in Laos in the 1960s and '70s. There, CIA advisers armed and helped organize an entire "secret army" of Hmong tribesmen fighting the North Vietnamese. The US cut support for the Hmong when the Indo-China wars ended, and the tribesmen have been fleeing Laos by the thousands.

"I think we're out of that business permanently," Mr. Aspin declared.

The congressman also indicated that the CIA is not back in the business of subverting governments but is instead engaged, for the most part, in operations that are "less dramatic."

Mr. Aspin said the upsurge in covert operations has come over the past six months or so, in part because of the Carter administration's frustration with a number of developments overseas.

He described covert operations as intermediate steps, in a realm somewhere between diplomacy and the use of military force, that are designed secretly to influence overseas events. As an example, he said the CIA might try to influence a given government to place a person friendly to the United States in a key Cabinet post.

Mr. Aspin's disclosures come at a time of much debate over whether Congress should loosen certain restrictions on the CIA. He said he is not opposed to some of the changes that are being proposed but would like to see them made only as part of a comprehensive charter of "do's and don'ts" for the CIA.

Mr. Aspin said it was nonsense to argue that the CIA has been hobbled because eight Senate and House committees have the duty of overseeing its secret operations. The Carter administration wants to reduce the number of such committees to two.

In reality, Mr. Aspin said, only three of these committees are intensively involved in oversight, while notification of such operations is limited on other committees to only a few members.